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Review of “Art and Morality”

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Book Review

Art and Morality, Bermu'dez, Jose', and Gardner, Sebastian, editors. (International Library of Philosophy), Routledge, New York, 2003, 303 pp, ISBN 0-415-19252-8.

This Routledge anthology is a collection of essays in honor of Cambridge philosopher, Michael Tanner (*Wagner*, London 1997; *Nietzsche*, Oxford 1994). The contributors, some of whom were Tanner's students, are unified in their belief that "the realm of the aesthetic cannot and should not, be divorced from the realm of the moral..." (1) and most use Tanner's work as a starting point. These general commitments are perhaps the only things which integrate this heterogeneous and interesting contribution to the topic of art and morality which compares favorably to other recent anthologies covering similar terrain e.g., *Aesthetics and Ethics* (Cambridge, 2001), and *Art and Its Messages* (Pennsylvania, 1997).

The editors, Bermu'dez and Gardner, have organized the fourteen essays (thirteen of which appear to be original – Tanner's landmark essay "Sentimentality" appeared in *PAS*, 77 1976-77) into two sections: those which have to do with issues of theory, and those which pursue the theme of art and morality in the context of a particular work of art or an historical figure. The anthology begins with a useful introduction explaining the purpose of the volume and briefly describing the contributions.

The first section is highlighted by spirited discussions of the relationships between artwork, the imaginative capacities, and moral perspectives. The modern context of these discussions is in works by Nussbaum, Carroll, Gaut, and Tanner. Christopher Hamilton, in "Art and Moral Education" (37), disputes Nussbaum's claim that the sensitive reading of the novel "promotes mercy through its invitation to empathetic understanding" (40). He declares, with D.Z. Phillips, that the plausibility of the claim rests on a highly judicious choice of literature. Hamilton points out the although novels can represent a morally reprehensible point of view, this is good if we are interested in moral education. The presentation of a disturbing point of view provides an opportunity for clarifying moral beliefs and exploring the meaning of one's own morality.

Matthew Kieran's, "Forbidden Knowledge: The Challenge of Immoralism", (56) pursues a theme similar to Hamilton's. Against the view that a moral defect must be an aesthetic defect, he argues that the morally reprehensible character of an artwork may even be a virtue in that it can allow one to hone one's preferred values by its invitation "to take up a perspective we would not otherwise entertain" (63).

But how plausible is it that one can imaginatively enter into these (presumably) alien perspectives? In "Make-believe Morality and Fictional Worlds" (74) Mary Mothersill explores the question in the context of a debate between, Kendall Walton and Tanner on the puzzle of "imaginative resistance". Walton (with

Hume) argues that it is impossible to imaginatively adopt a perspective which one finds morally repellent. Tanner argues that Walton has an impoverished view of the novel and that the novelist is not merely presenting a set of moral propositions which the reader is to affirm or deny. Instead the novelist presents a moral world view in answer to the question of how we ought to live. Mothersill suggests that a source of difficulty in this debate involves the question of what it means to have an imaginative success or failure. She recommends the work of Richard Moran and Tamar Szabo-Gendler as fruitful sources of inquiry about this issue.

The second section of the anthology contains contributions concerning music and the visual arts. Roger Scruton (143) makes that case that Wagner's *The Ring of Nibelung* possesses a rich philosophical vision of the modern human predicament as inspired by Kant. John Armstrong's engaging essay, "Moral Depth and Pictorial Art" (170) examines two paintings by Sassetta and Poussin and investigates the contention that paintings can contribute to moral understanding.

Other chapters in the section begin with an historical orientation. Aaron Ridley's "Critical Conversions" (131) uses Nietzsche's remark that "My judgment is my judgment – no one else is entitled to it" (*Beyond Good and Evil*, New York 1966), as a starting point to explore the ethical character of art-critical judgments and in particular the conditions under which one is justified to have such a judgment. Continuing a discussion begun in his piece on tragedy in *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*, (London, 2001), Alex Neill offers an interpretation of Schopenhauer which suggests that the value of tragedy lies not in the pleasure we receive from witnessing it, but in what it reveals cognitively about the world, and in what it suggests is the appropriate response to that knowledge (216).

Sebastian Gardner (218) and Christopher Janaway (260) both address Nietzsche's views on art and morality. In an article remarkable for its scholarship, Gardner begins with Nietzsche's nascent argument in *The Birth of Tragedy* (London, 1993) about the incompatibility of tragedy and morality, and ends with a full-blown defense of tragedy as a contender against morality as the creator of fundamental human values. Janaway addresses the question (again in the context of Nietzsche's writings) of when artistic style can be put to the service of philosophical ends. This engaging anthology concludes with a provocative essay by Colin Lyas (277) on the concept of expression and its relationship to philosophical and artistic activity.

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